

# A Sociolinguistic Study of Compliment Responses Among Americans and Indonesians and Its Implications for Teaching English

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## Abstract

*The writers in this study would like to find out whether there is any difference between Indonesians and Americans in responding to compliments. This study also attempts to discover whether both the Americans and Indonesians in this study show a preference for certain types of compliment responses. Lastly, it also tries to see if a certain variable like status can play a role in determining the types of compliment responses chosen. To collect the data, the writers use the elicitation method. They use two sets of role-play consisting of four situations made as close as possible to the real-life situations. The first is for the Indonesian respondents; the other for the Americans. The respondents are asked to respond to the situations and their responses are then recorded on the tape for further analysis. The data are then analyzed using Herbert's Twelve Types of Compliment Responses. The research finds that both the Indonesians and Americans show differences in responding to Compliments. They are different in terms of both the types of Compliment Responses chosen and the frequencies made. The findings also reveal that status is an important variable affecting the choice of a particular response.*

**Keywords:** *compliment responses, sociolinguistics, language function, language teaching, Americans and Indonesians, Herbert.*

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Complimenting is a language function often used to encourage or reinforce desired behavior. A compliment is often given to a person who has appearance or who shows performance pleasing the complimenter. Thus, a compliment is likely to be given to a person who is wearing a nice-looking dress or a person who has done a good job, for instance.

Although people often like being complimented, how to give an appropriate response to a compliment may pose a problem to the recipient. This is because the recipient of the compliment may tend to minimize it due to the constraint that s/he has to show modesty.

In learning English, Indonesian learners of English can be subject to the influence of Indonesian culture which values modesty. This can cause them to resort to their own rules of speaking. When complimented, they may reject rather than accept it. Thus, instead of saying "thank you", they may say "oh, no".

In addition to the differences in the rules of speaking, transfer of training may also prevent Indonesian learners of English from responding appropriately to a compliment. Having been taught in school that the general response to a compliment is the canonical "thank you", they may assume that it is the only appropriate response to compliments.

Since knowing the appropriate responses to compliments is useful to communicative competence, in this study, we, the writers, would like to find the answers to the following questions :

1. How do the Indonesians differ from their American counterparts in responding to compliments ?
2. What types of compliment responses are often used by both groups of speakers?
3. Does status determine the types of compliment responses used by both groups?

## **Literature Review**

### **a. Sociolinguistics**

According to Holmes (1992), Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to society. Sociolinguists are interested in language variation occurring in society. They seek to explain why people speak differently in different social contexts, and try to identify the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning. Thus, a sociolinguistic study is often concerned with the relationship between social factors (age, sex, social status, ethnicity, education, etc.) and language factors (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, language function, etc.)

### **b. Compliments**

Manes and Wolfson (as cited in Wolfson 1989) classify a compliment into two categories : that which has to do with appearance and/or possessions, and that which deals with an ability or accomplishment. Compliments on appearance and possessions, according to them, appear to be more generally given than those on ability or accomplishment. Almost anyone in American society feels free to offer a compliment on an item of a hairstyle or a car, for example. However, when it comes to ability, apparently higher-status people are in a better position to offer compliments as a positive reinforcement to lower-status people.

Wolfson (as cited in Herbert 1990) who have studied compliments among middle-class Americans find out that women are frequent recipients of compliments, especially those having to do with appearance or possessions, regardless of their status. Males, on the other hand, especially those of higher status, rarely receive compliments related to ability or performance, and receive none on appearance.

Pomerantz (as cited in Herbert 1990), in her study of compliment responses, states that “thank you,” is usually used when compliments cannot be exchanged because the referent is a belonging, attribute, or accomplishment of the addressee and the speaker has no equivalent object on which a compliment can be focussed. She also maintains that the status and the relationship between the addressor and the addressee are important factors in determining a response type. Thus, a self-praise avoidance response may be used when the condition of both the addressor and the addressee is symmetrical. However, in speech situations in which compliments are given by persons of higher status than the recipients, the most common response is “thank you”.

Herbert (1990) in his study of compliment behavior among Americans and South African English Speakers found that compliment acceptance is far less common among the former than the latter. The American speakers accepted only slightly more than one-third of the compliments offered (36%), but Acceptance was the dominant response among South African Speakers (76%). These findings lead to his conclusion that “American compliments are vehicles for the (re) negotiation of Solidarity ...” (p.220). On the other hand, the South African compliments serve to express admiration or praise.

Herbert (1990), in his study of both groups of speakers above, employed 12 types of compliment responses which can be listed as follows :

- **Appreciation Token**  
This refers to the acceptance of the compliment (e.g., “thanks” and “thank you”)
- **Comment Acceptance**  
Here the addressee accepts the complimentary force and offers a comment related to the topic (e.g., Yeah, it's my favorite, too)
- **Praise Upgrade**  
Here the addressee accepts the compliment, but states that the complimentary force is not adequate (e.g., Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't is ?)
- **Comment History**  
This type is like no. 2, Comment Acceptance. However, the difference is that the comments here are impersonal, shifting the force of the compliment from the addressee (e.g. I bought it for the trip to Arizona)
- **Reassignment**  
Here the addressee accepts the compliment but transfers the complimentary force to a third person (e.g., My brother gave it to me) or to the object complimented (e.g., It really knitted itself)
- **Return**  
Like in no. 5, the addressee here agrees with the compliment assertion, but returns the complimentary force to the speaker (e.g., So's yours)
- **Scale Down**  
The addressee here doesn't agree with the compliment, pointing some flaw in the object complimented or stating that the praise is an overstatement (e.g., It's really quite old)
- **Question**  
The addressee here questions the sincerity or the appropriateness of the compliment (e.g., Do you really think so ?)
- **Disagreement**  
The addressee here claims that the object is not worth complimenting (e.g., I hate it)
- **Qualification**  
Like in no. 9, the addressee here also shows disagreement, but it is weaker in that the recipient qualifies the addressor's claim using though, but, well, etc. (e.g., It's alright, but Len's is nicer)
- **No Acknowledgement.**  
Here the addressee seems unaware of the compliment and responds by giving either an irrelevant response or no response..
- **Request Interpretation**  
Here the addressee, deliberately or not, interprets the speech act not as a compliment but rather as a request (e.g., you wanna borrow this one too ?)

## Methodology

### a. Data Collection

To get the data, the writers use the elicitation method, a method used by researchers such as Olshtain and Cohen in their study of apologies in Hebrew and English, Beebe in her work on refusals in Japanese and English, and Einstein and Bodman in their

investigation of expressions of gratitude among native and non-native speakers of English. According to Wolfson (1989), this method is useful to "collect data which may be compared for the purpose of crosslinguistic study and also to investigate the sociolinguistic problems faced by second language learners" (p.69). In addition, this method can also be used to get a large amount of data we need within a relatively short time.

The data collection was done with the help of a student, Rindang Novita (Reg. No. 11490011), who laboriously had to find native speakers at various locations in 1995. The subjects in this study are 20 Indonesians and 20 Americans. All of the Indonesians are from Nipsea Paint, Ltd.; the Americans, due to the constraints to find them, are from various backgrounds, with senior high school graduates as their minimum education.

The instruments used by the writers to get the data are two sets of role plays consisting of four situations each. The first set is made for the Indonesian respondents using Indonesian, and the second one is for the American respondents using English.

The role plays for the Indonesian respondents are as follows :

- Role-play 1 : A compliment on ability said by a superior to a subordinate.  
Situation : Anda seorang salesman. Anda berhasil mencapai tingkat penjualan yang ditargetkan dan bahkan melampauinya. Atasan anda sangat bangga dengan hasil yang anda peroleh dan memuji anda.  
Atasan : Hasil kerja anda betul-betul hebat kali ini.  
Anda : .....
- Role-play 2 : A Compliment on ability said by a subordinate to a superior.  
Situation : Anda seorang manager personalia yang membutuhkan seorang pegawai baru untuk menempati sebuah posisi yang cukup penting. Pilihan anda jatuh pada seorang yang masih muda, supel dan berbakat. Pegawai anda yang lain merasa senang bekerja sama dengan pegawai bari itu. Mereka senang dengan pilihan anda dan memuji anda.  
Bawahan : Bapak/Ibu sungguh pandai memilih orang.  
Anda : ....
- Role-play 3 : A Compliment on look said by a superior to a subordinate.  
Situation : Anda bekerja di bidang marketing. Anda diundang hadir dalam suatu acara makan malam bersama atasan anda. Anda berpakaian rapi dan atasan anda tampak senang melihat penampilan anda.  
Atasan : Wah, Anda kelihatan tampan/cantik malam ini.  
Anda : ....
- Role-play 4 : A Compliment on look said by a subordinate to a superior.  
Situation : Anda seorang manajer. Dalam suatu acara tamasya bersama bawahan anda, anda mengenakan celana jeans dan kaus. Padahal anda biasanya tampak formal sekali. Bawahan anda tampak agak terkejut dan senang melihat penampilan anda.  
Bawahan : Wah, bapak/ibu kelihatan beda sekali hari ini.  
Anda : ....

The role-plays for the American respondents are in the English version of the above role-plays.

## **b. Data Analysis**

In analyzing the data, the writers use the modified version of Herbert's (1989) Twelve Types of Compliment Responses which consist of *Appreciation Token*, *Comment Acceptance*, *Praise Upgrade*, *Comment History*, *Reassignment*, *Return*, *Scale Down*, *Question*, *Disagreement*, *Qualification*, *No Acknowledgment*, and *Request Interpretation*. Utterances which do not fit Herbert's categories will be categorized according to the nature of the data.

The analysis is done by taking an utterance and then put it into categories according to Herbert's categories. The examples are as follows:

### **Indonesian Data Analysis**

Terima kasih, Pak.  
(Thank you, sir)

Appreciation  
Token

Keberhasilan saya ini juga berkat Dukungan bapak.  
(My success is due to your encouragement)

Reassignment

The first sentence of this utterance expresses gratitude ; that is why, it is categorized into Appreciation Token. The second sentence shows that the addressee shifts compliments to the addresser; therefore, the utterance falls into the category of Reassignment. Therefore, it is categorized into type Reassignment.

Based on these categories, the writers make a table containing these types along with the number of occurrence used by both the Indonesian subordinates and superiors and American subordinates and superiors.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of the data is based on the Table of Comparison between Indonesian and American respondents on the types of Compliment Responses and their frequencies. The table serves three functions. First, it shows the types of compliment responses used by Indonesian and American respondents. Second, it reveals the frequency of each type; and third, it points out the types of Compliment Responses often used by Indonesian Subordinates and Superiors and American Subordinate and Superiors.

Table 1. A Comparison between Indonesian and American Respondents on the Types of Compliment Responses and their Frequencies.

Types of Compliment Responses	Indonesian		Total	American		Total
	Subordinate	Superior		Subordinate	Superior	
1. Appreciation Token	29	10	39	34	21	55
2. Comment Acceptance	12	22	34	3	16	19
3. Praise Upgrade	1	-	1	5	1	6
4. Reassignment	8	3	11	1	3	4
5. Return	3	2	5	4	1	5
6. Scale Down	5	6	11	-	1	1
7. Question	1	3	4	-	2	2
8. No Acknowledgment	-	4	4	-	3	3
9. Promise	9	-	9	-	-	-
10. Hope	-	9	9	-	-	-

### • Appreciation Token

It is shown that the use of *Appreciation Token* as a response to the compliment occurred 39 times among Indonesians and 55 times among Americans. The American respondents expressed gratitude such as “Thank you very much, Sir” more often than the Indonesians. An example of the Indonesian respondents using this type is “Terima kasih, Pak/Bu”. Moreover, it is also interesting to note that the occurrence of subordinates and superiors among Indonesian respondents using this type differed greatly, that is, 29 among subordinates and 10 among superiors. American subordinates had higher frequencies than their superiors, as well, that is 34 for subordinates and 21 for superiors.

### • Comment Acceptance

An example of this type is “Saya mencoba menerapkan semua saran bapak dan syukurlah bisa mencapai target penjualan” (I had tried to put your suggestion into practice and fortunately I could reach the sales target); while an example of the American respondents is “I am glad it works well”. This type of Compliment Response occurred 34 times among Indonesians and only 19 times among Americans.

### • Praise Upgrade

In this type, the comparison between the two nationalities is 1 for Indonesians and 6 for Americans. One example of the American respondents is “I worked hard for it but I was very pleased the way the figure came out”. And one Indonesian respondent said “Bapak/Ibu harus percaya bahwa saya tahu bagaimana tampil di setiap kesempatan” (You have to believe that I know how to dress on every occasion). Among Indonesians, *Praise Upgrade* occurred once among subordinates. Among Americans, however, it occurred 5 times among subordinates and only once among superiors, meaning that the subordinates used it more often than the superiors.

### • Reassignment

Indonesian respondents used *Reassignment* almost three times as many as their American counterparts (11:4). One of the Indonesian respondents used this type by saying “Keberhasilan ini juga berkat dorongan bapak” (This success is also due to your encouragement); while one of the Americans said “... but the rest of the team also helped me”. The Indonesian subordinates used it more often than their superiors (8:3), while among Americans, it is 1 for subordinates and 3 for superiors.

- **Return**

In returning compliment, Indonesians and Americans had almost the same occurrence (6:5). One such example said by an Indonesian respondent is “Bapak/ibu juga kelihatan hebat malam ini” (You also look great tonight, Sir/Mam); while an American used this type by saying “Oh, but you look great, too”. The Indonesian subordinates and superiors had a slight difference in occurrence (3:2) ; while American subordinates used it more than the superiors (4:1). It means that subordinates dominate the use of Return. And it occurred only with compliments on appearance.

- **Scale Down**

In *Scale Down* It was the Indonesian respondents dominating its use. They used it more than the American respondents (11:1). An example of this type said by an Indonesian is “Saya hanya memenuhi tanggung jawab saya” (I only tried to do my duty); and there is only one used by the American, that is, “Well, I didn’t know about that”. In addition, The Indonesian subordinates used it less often than superiors (5:6). In contrast, the American superior did it once. Instead of admitting that they deserve compliments, The Indonesians shift the compliments from themselves or even downgrade them. They shift the force of the compliments to another person or condition, making them deserve compliments. On the other hand, the American seldom used this type, may be because they value their achievements more than the Indonesians. For Americans, it may be important for others to know how well they have done; and the most important of all is the fact that their achievements are due to their own efforts. Therefore, it may not occur to them to transfer compliments from themselves, let alone downgrade them.

- **Question**

An example of this type used by the Indonesians is “Ah, masak?” (Oh, really?) and an example said by the American is “Oh, really?”. In this type, the Indonesian respondents used it more than the American respondents (4:2); and it is mostly done by superiors : Indonesians (1:3), and Americans (0:2). It shows that the Indonesian superiors questioned the sincerity of the compliments they received three times as many as the Indonesian subordinates; while among the Americans it appeared once among the superiors only. It means that the subordinates gave no contribution to this type at all.

- **No Acknowledgment**

An Indonesian example of this type is “Ya, nggak lucu dong kalau saya pakai jas” (Well, I would look odd in a suit); while an American example is “Well, I think it’s good to relax sometimes”. This type of compliment response is used by both Indonesian and American superiors only (4:3). No subordinates used it. This type of

compliment response indicates that the person complimented is unaware of being complimented.

- **Promise**

This type is not the type introduced by Herbert. It is a type for the utterances that does not match Herbert's categories. In this type the addressee makes a promise to do better than what he or she has done such as, "...lain kali saya akan lebih meningkatkan prestasi saya lagi" (I will improve my achievement next time). This type occurred 9 times among Indonesian subordinates only. It may indicate that lower-status people give promises because their place demands it from them. There is no way their superiors promise them anything because it is subordinates' duty to please their superiors by doing good work. From another point of view, this response can be also seen as an expression of gratitude, for the subordinates may feel indebted to superiors for their compliments. Therefore they give a promise as a return for their compliments.

- **Hope**

This type does not belong to Herbert's categories. In this type the addressee expects things to work well such as "Saya harap kalian bisa bekerja sama dengan baik" (I hope you can get along well). It is used by the Indonesian superiors only (9 times). When responding to a compliment on ability, it is the right of the superiors to expect their subordinates to work well, so it may be natural that they express their expectation when complimented by their subordinates.

## **Conclusion**

The research findings show that the American and Indonesian respondents have different and similar ways of expressing responses to compliments. The difference may be due to the different cultural backgrounds. Even though there are many similarities, the frequencies of each type can give us a clear insight on the roles of those different cultural backgrounds.

Both the American and Indonesian respondents use ten types of compliments responses, eight of which are based on Herbert's categories. The others are used by the Indonesian respondents only. The eight types are Appreciation Token, Comment Acceptance, Praise Upgrade, Reassignment, Return, Scale Down, Question, and No Acknowledgment. The other two are Promise and Hope.

Of all these types, the respondents mostly used Appreciation Token. The high frequency of Appreciation Token ("Thank you", "Terima kasih") may happen because it is considered the most appropriate response. Even when the addressee does not know how to respond to a compliment, "Thank you" can become a simple response. Moreover, by comparison, the American respondents had a higher frequency than the Indonesians (55:39).

The second highest frequency of Compliment Responses is Comment Acceptance. However, The Indonesian respondents here used it more than the Americans (34:19). This also happens to Reassignment and Scale Down which are dominated by the Indonesian respondents (11:4 and 11:1).

Furthermore, it is found that status becomes an important variable in giving responses to compliments. Appreciation Token is used more by the Indonesian and



American subordinates than by their superiors. On the other hand, Comment Acceptance is used more often by both the Indonesian and American superiors than by their subordinates.

## Implications for Teaching

- The fact that the Americans in this study produce more Appreciation Tokens than their Indonesian counterparts (55 : 39) indicates that the native speakers of English accept compliments more frequently than the Indonesian speakers. This may suggest that the canonical “thanks” or “thank you” remains a popular compliment response among the native speakers. However, the fact that the Americans also used other compliment types (40), of which the second most popular is Comment Acceptance (19), should alert the Indonesian learners of English that “thank you” or “thanks” is not the only appropriate response to compliments. The stereotype that Americans always accept a compliment and that the acceptance is indicated by “thanks” or “thank you” is disconfirmed by this study which discovers that their responses to compliments are varied
- The fact that the Indonesians in this study produce more than the Americans in types like Comment Acceptance (34:19), Reassignment (11:4), Scale Down (11:1), Promise (9:0), and Hope (9:0) indicates a different behavior in responding to compliments. This may suggest that the Indonesians are still under cultural constraint to show modesty. In fact Promise and Hope, two compliment response types not produced by the Americans, look very typical of Indonesians. An example of Promise is “I will improve my achievements next time”. To avoid negative interference from the learners' native language, teachers may need to pay more attention to these areas.
- The fact that the subordinates from both groups of speakers dominate Appreciation Token (Indonesians 29:10); Americans (34:21) and that superiors from both groups dominate Comment Acceptance (Indonesians 22:12; Americans 16:3) suggests that status can be an important factor affecting compliment responses. Both the American and Indonesian Subordinates apparently think that they have to accept the compliments from their superiors (judges of their job performance) and the most appropriate response is the simple “thanks” or “thank you”. The superior, however, do not have to accept the compliments offered to them. Or if they have to, they can accept it in a more indirect way. From the findings above Indonesian learners of English may infer that Appreciation Token (“thank you” or “thanks”) should be used especially when the compliment recipient (addressee) has a lower status than the giver (addressor). However, when the addressee occupies a higher social ladder, s/he may consider using other types of compliment responses as alternatives, the most popular of which is Comment Acceptance.

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